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ABSTRACT

In 1972, M. McCombs and D. Shaw introduced the idea that the mass media have the ability to tell the public which issues are of major importance in a political campaign by virtue of the amount of coverage they give each. This they termed the "agenda setting" function of the media. A study was conducted to investigate various aspects of the agenda setting function of the media as they occurred in a gubernatorial campaign. Four separate agendas were examined: (1) aggregate newspaper--all news stories appearing in a newspaper that were related to an issue regardless of its linkage to the campaign; (2) campaign agenda--a list of those issues given coverage by the media that were linked to the campaign, rank ordered in terms of amount of coverage each received; (3) editorial agenda--a list of those issues given coverage by the media in editorials, also rank ordered; and (4) public agenda, a list of issues perceived by the public as most important in the campaign, as elicited through telephone interviews. The three media agendas were then correlated with the public agenda. The results indicated that the campaign and editorial agendas were generally more effective in setting public agendas than was the aggregate newspaper agenda. The findings suggest that if the media devoted more attention to the obvious linkages between important issues and a campaign, the agenda setting effect could be enhanced. (FL)

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AGENDA-SETTING AND POLITICAL FRAMING IN THE 1982 ILLINOIS GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN

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In 1972, McCombs and Shaw introduced the idea that the mass media have the ability to tell the public which issues are of major importance during political campaigns by virtue of the amount of coverage an issue receives.[1] In otherwords, the more coverage an issue receives, the more important that issue should be in the public's perception. McCombs and Shaw have called this the "agenda setting" function of the mass media.

The agenda setting function of the mass media has received considerable attention since McCombs and Shaw's initial study. The preponderance of these studies have focused on the various conditions contingent to the agenda setting effect, stressing audience variables rather than content variables. In fact some researchers in this area are now suggesting that a theory of agenda setting may be in order. To this end, McCombs has suggested a variety of methods to build such a theory.[2] One of these methods was the construction of a matrix of audience variables. Building on this idea, Williams and Semlak proposed two matrices, one each for antecedent and intervening variables. All of these variables specify conditions contingent in the audience. For example, committed voters were more affected by the media than uncommitted voters.[3]

Other studies have also focused on audience variables in both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. For example, Weaver has found some support for the need for orientation on agenda setting.[4] Some other variables that have been found to be important to the agenda setting process are: political party affiliation, age, political commitment, sex, political uncertainty, political involvement, intention to vote, etc.[5] In addition, longitudinal studies have uncovered some causal relationships between media agendas and personal agendas.[6] Reiterating the point made earlier, the majority of these studies have considered audience variables, not content variables, as contingent conditions.

As with many studies examining media effects, the preceeding research has offered only partial support for the agenda setting function. Other studies have failed to find such an effect. For example, although Williams and Semlak identified important contingent conditions, their results offered only partial support for the agenda setting hypothesis.[7] Longitudinal studies such as the ones conducted by Tipton, Haney and Baseheart, Weaver, Auh, Stelle and Wilhoit and Sohn have found no real causal relationships between the media agenda of issues and the personal agendas.[8]

One possible reason for these inconsistent results could be that these studies have not included content variables as contingent to the agenda setting process. Only a

few studies have considered some of these variables. For example, several researchers have found that newspapers have a stronger effect on personal agendas than do television network news.[9] This finding does not apply to all types of issues. Palmgreen and Clarke found that newspapers had a stronger agenda setting effect than television network news for local issues.[10] Williams and Larsen found that local agendas are more affected by the media than national agendas.[11] One of the few longitudinal studies to consider content variables found an effect on community discussions for local and national stories, but not for state, regional or international stories.[12]

One of the only indepth attempts to determine the impact of content variables on agenda setting was conducted by Williams and Semlak. They found that story placement and some methods of presentation by the television networks affected personal agendas during the 1976 Presidential campaign.[13] However, this study failed to show how methods of presentation are linked to the issues discussed by the candidates on television newscasts and in the newspaper.

A crucial ingredient missing from the preceding studies is what the media allow the candidates to communicate to the electorate. All of the preceding studies considered the television newscast or the newspaper as the unit of analysis. The media agendas in these studies were deter-

mined by categorizing stories during election periods without regard to their relevancy to the campaign. All of the stories in a television newscast were analyzed, in the aggregate, regardless of the linkage to the campaign. For example, a story on mortgage rates could be coded as inflation regardless of whether the source was the Chase Manhatten Bank or a campaign speech by one of the candidates. The problem with this procedure is that the media agenda becomes comprised of campaign and non-campaign issues. The audience might not make the connection between the issues and the campaign unless the media do it for them, i.e.,tells them this is a campaign issue because it is in a story which links it to the campaign.

Williams, Shapiro, Cutbirth and Semlak addressed this issue in a study on the 1980 Presidential campaign. They found that when the media give issues a political "frame" they are better able to set personal agendas as compared to when the media are simply communicating about the day's events, without relating them to the campaign.[14] This study points out that a campaign agenda of issues is more effective than the traditional aggregate media agenda when setting personal agendas, at least in a Presidential campaign.

Another content variable that has not been examined

is the "editorial" frame, i.e., an agenda of issues presented through editorials. When treating editorials, previous research has always included them as part of the aggregate media agenda. No study has looked exclusively at the relationship between the "editorial" agenda and the public's personal agenda of issues. One would assume this relationship should be strong since editorials provide arguments and reasoning why people should feel a certain way about issues thereby intensifying the importance of the issue for the public. Also, the editorials are likely to deal more exclusively with campaign issues than the aggregate news, which includes reports on the day's events, which are not necessarily related to campaign issues.

The purpose of this study is to replicate the finding of Williams, Shapiro, Cutbirth and Semlak at the state level, i.e., that the campaign agenda presented by the media will have a stronger agenda setting effect than the aggregate media agenda. In addition, this study will consider the editorial frame and examine the relationship between the "editorial" agenda of issues and the public's personal agenda of issues.

METHOD

Four separate agendas were examined in the present investigation: aggregate newspaper; campaign; editorial; and the public agenda. Each is discussed below.

Aggregate Newspaper Agenda

The aggregate newspaper agenda was determined by content analyzing the weekday daily editions of theBloomington-Normal Daily Pantagraph between September 7 and November 2, 1982. The analysis was performed on the front section, which contains two editorial/opinion pages, of each weekday edition. Each story, or article, was measured in terms of column inches, using a six-column newspaper format. All stories not fitting this format were mathematically converted to facilitate comparisons. Initially, the content of each story was coded into one of twenty-five different content categories. These were subsequently grouped into ten issue categories. The unit of analysis was the content and not the story as defined by the newspaper. For example, if a news item was about the economy and devoted a portion of the story to the impact on municipal services and a second portion of the same story to unemployment, the item was coded in the municipal services category for the first portion and in the unemployment/economy category for the second portion. The number of column inches devoted to each portion was tabulated for each of the two issues and added to the total in their respective categories.

The number of column inches, in each story, were totalled as they applied to each of the issue categories. A rank-ordered agenda was obtained after computing total column inches for each issue category.

Campaign Agenda

A campaign agenda is a list of those issues given coverage by the mass media, that are directly linked to the campaign or to one of the candidates, rank-ordered in terms of amount of coverage each issue receives. The campaign agenda was determined in the same manner as the aggregate agenda except that only those items that were directly linked to the gubernatorial campaign, or to either of the gubernatorial candidates were included. Each item receiving a direct link to the campaign, or candidates, was recorded and placed into one of the ten issue categories. The total number of column inches devoted to each item was recorded. Totals for each of the ten issue categories were then used to determine ranks for the campaign agenda.

Editorial Agenda

An editorial agenda is a list of those issues given coverage by the media in editorials, rank-ordered in terms of the amount of coverage each issue receives. The editorial agenda was determined in the same manner as the aggregate and campaign agendas except that only those items appearing in editorials were included. The total number of column inches devoted to each item was recorded. Totals for each of the ten issue categories were then used to determine ranks for the editorial agenda.

Public Agenda

The public agenda was measured through telephone interviews administered by trained coders. Working from a list of randomly generated telephone numbers, 411 residents of Bloomington-Normal, Illinois were contacted by telephone between October 18 and October 28, 1982. Three hundred twenty-six residents were eventually interviewed, resulting in an adjusted completion rate of 79%. The public agenda was determined by answers to the following question:

> What do you, personally, think is the most important issue facing the state of Illinois during the current race for governor?

Using responses from the above question, a public agenda was constructed by summing the number of respondents naming issues in the ten issue categories (developed from the media agendas). The intercoder reliability was .90.

RESULTS

The coding procedures described above resulted in ten issue categories. The issues and selected examples are:

1. Agriculture - farms, crops, agricultural policy
2. Civil Rights - bail bond issue, 1st Amendment
3. Conservation - environmental items, pollution
4. Crime - capital punishment, prisons, drunk driving
5. Education

6. Energy - nuclear energy, utility costs;
7. Health/Welfare - Social Security, look-alike drugs, health costs, tylenol tampering;
8. Municipal Services - road repair, garbage collection, mass transit;
9. Taxes
10. Unemployment/Economy

The media agendas were rank ordered depending on the accumulated space devoted to each issue in each of the ten issue categories. The public agenda was rank ordered depending on the number of respondents naming an issue relevant to the above categories. Spearman Rho rank order correlations were computed to determine the ability of the media to set personal agendas.

Aggregate, Campaign, and Editorial Agendas

The campaign agenda was significantly correlated with the aggregate agenda and the editorial agenda, though the aggregate agenda and the editorial agenda were not significantly correlated. The results appear in Table 1.

The aggregate, campaign, and editorial agendas appear in Table 2. According to all three media agendas, unemployment/economy was the number one issue in the Illinois gubernatorial campaign.

While the campaign agenda was significantly correlated

with the aggregate newspaper agenda there were some striking differences. For example, the aggregate agenda had agriculture as a much more important issue (ranked fifth) than did the campaign agenda (ranked last). This would suggest that there was much news to report about agriculture, but the great majority of it was not issue oriented, therefore was unrelated to the race for governor. This is supported by the fact that the agriculture issue was relatively unimportant in the editorial agenda as well (ranked ninth).

Similarly, while the campaign and editorial agendas were significantly correlated there were some differences. For example, taxes was the second most important issue on the editorial agenda, whereas it only ranked sixth on the campaign agenda. This might indicate that the candidates may have tried to downplay taxes as an issue because they could not win with it, whereas the newspaper was not as inhibited about speaking out on the issue of taxes.

The campaign agendas for each of the two candidates were also computed (results can be seen in Table 3). The two candidates' campaign agendas were significantly correlated with each other ($r = .81$; $p < .05$).

Agenda Setting Effect

The three media agendas (aggregate, campaign, and editorial) were correlated with the public agenda. The results

appear in Table 4. The campaign and editorial agendas were significantly correlated with the public agenda. The aggregate agenda was not significantly correlated with the public agenda. These results suggest that the campaign and editorial agendas were generally more effective in setting personal agendas than the aggregate newspaper agenda.

DISCUSSION

One conclusion from these findings is that the campaign agenda had a stronger agenda-setting effect than did the aggregate agenda. This finding suggests that consumers of news need direct, obvious linkages between the campaign, the candidates, and the issues. To impact political cognitions, the media must make the connection between the campaign and the issues. The media must also emphasize how each candidate stands on each issue. To ignore issues as they relate to the campaign, or to the candidates, is to leave the news audience with an incomplete picture of the campaign and the candidates.

A second conclusion from these findings is that the editorial agenda also had a stronger agenda-setting effect than did the aggregate agenda. This suggests that editorials are likely to deal more exclusively with campaign issues than the aggregate news, which includes reports on the day's events, which are not necessarily related to issues of the campaign. Therefore, editorials do appear to make the linkage

between the issues and the campaign more effectively than the aggregate newspaper.

Therefore, both hypotheses in this study were supported. At the state level, the campaign agenda was more effective than the aggregate agenda in setting personal agendas, thereby supporting the finding of Williams, Shapiro, Cutbirth and Semlak. In addition, the editorial agenda was more closely related to personal agendas than was the aggregate agenda.

Another conclusion, masked by the statistically significant correlation between candidate agendas, was the apparent differences between agendas as they were linked to the candidates. Examining Table 3, one can see that there were differences in the way the candidates were linked to issues. For example, education ranked as the second most important issue on Stevenson's agenda, while it ranked only fifth on Thompson's agenda. Crime ranked second on Thompson's agenda, but only ranked fourth on Stevenson's. In addition, there were no items linking Stevenson to either agriculture, civil rights or conservation. The conclusion is, while these agendas were significantly correlated, they were not identical.

Another note regarding the candidate agendas is that Thompson had more than four times the issue coverage that

Stevenson had. This might be explained by the fact that Thompson, as the incumbant, had to take stands on issues by virtue of being governor, whereas he might not have taken stands on certain issues if he were only a candidate.

Finally, the results of this study do suggest that if the media devoted more attention to the obvious linkages between important issues and the campaign, the agenda setting effect could be enhanced. The results of this study also point out the importance of considering content variables as conditions contingent to the agenda setting process. Future research might consider how such content conditions interact with audience conditions to affect perceptions of campaign issues. Future research might also consider how the content conditions examined in this study interact with those considered in other studies, and how this interaction would affect perceptions of campaign issues.

Table 1

CORRELATIONS FOR THE
INTRAMEDIA AGENDAS

	Campaign	Editorial
Aggregate	.60*	.46
Campaign		.78*

* $p < .05$

Table 2

AGGREGATE, CAMPAIGN, AND EDITORIAL AGENDAS

	Aggregate	Campaign	Editorial
Agriculture	191.13[1]	4.00	8.38
Civil Rights	92.13	5.63	15.75
Conservation	28.75	9.75	8.13
Crime	269.88	66.50	36.88
Education	143.50	42.63	27.00
Energy	204.13	15.13	13.88
Health/Welfare	358.75	35.75	36.38
Municipal Services	95.25	31.50	29.25
Taxes	77.25	30.13	45.63
Unemployment/Economy	381.88	90.88	69.38
Total	1842.63	331.88	290.63

[1]Total column inches devoted to each issue.

Table 3

CANDIDATE AGENDAS

	Thompson	Stevenson
Agriculture	4.00[1]	0.00
Civil Rights	5.63	0.00
Conservation	9.75	0.00
Crime	56.63	9.88
Education	24.75	17.88
Energy	13.50	1.63
Health/Welfare	31.13	4.63
Municipal Services	20.88	10.63
Taxes	28.38	1.75
Unemployment/Economy	72.50	18.38
Total	267.13	64.75

[1]Total column inches devoted to each issue.

Table 4

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN MEDIA
AND PUBLIC AGENDAS

	Aggregate	Campaign	Editorial
Public Agenda	.45	.77*	.85*

* $p < .05$

FOOTNOTES

[1]Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 36: 176-187 (1972).

[2]Maxwell McCombs, "Agenda-Setting Research: A Bibliographic Essay," Political Communication Review, 1:1-7 (1976); Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "An Up-to-Date Report on the Agenda-Setting Function," a paper presented to the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Acapulco, Mexico, 1980.

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[7]Williams and Semlak.

[8]Leonard Tipton, Roger Haney and John Baseheart, "Media Agenda Setting in City and State Election Campaigns," Journalism Quarterly, 52:15-22 (1975); David Weaver, Taik Auh, Timothy Stehle and Cleveland Wilhoit, "A Path Analysis of Individual Agenda Setting During the 1977 Indiana Senatorial Campaign," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association forEducation in Journalism, Ottowa, 1975; Ardyth Sohn, "A Longitudinal Analysis of Local Non-Political Agenda Setting Effects," Journalism Quarterly, 55:325-333 (1978).

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[10]Philip Palmgreen and Peter Clarke, "Agenda-Setting with Local and National Issues," Communication Research, 4:435-452 (1977).

[11]Williams and Larsen.

[12]Atwood, Sohn and Sohn.

[13]Wenmouth Williams, Jr. and William Semlak, "Structural Effects of TV Coverage on Politcal Agendas," Journal of Communication, 28:114-119 (1978).

[14]Wenmouth Williams, Jr., Mitchell E. Shapiro, Craig Cutbirth and William Semlak, "A Longitudinal Study of Issues and Their Impact on the 1980 Presidential Campaign," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Chicago 1981; Wenmouth Williams, Jr., Mitchell E. Shapiro and Craig Cutbirth, "The Impact of Non-Campaign and Campaign Agendas on Audience Perceptions of Issues in the 1980 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly, in press.